

Do No Harm

By Erin Endom; Illustrations by Chris Trevas

It all seemed pretty straightforward the day I was called into Commander Briessen's office. "Temporary detached duty," he called it. Naturally, I wondered what kind of detached duty a hospital ship medic warranted, but I didn't have to wonder very long -- only until Lieutenant Haslam showed up.

I have to say he didn't look like a topnotch commando. A couple of centimeters taller than I, light brown hair thinning on top, pale blue eyes, roundish face, slender build; he looked like an accountant. But everyone in the Rebellion knew his reputation by then. What could he possibly want with me?

I found out in short order. Gebnerret Vibrion, the political head of another Rebel cell, had been captured by the Imps and was undergoing interrogation on Selnesh, a notorious prison planet in the Irishi sector. He knew too much to be left in custody; he had to be either broken out or killed quickly. Okay, I could understand that. I hadn't been with the Rebellion very long, but even I knew that given enough time, anyone could and would break under interrogation: physical torture, drugs, threats to loved ones -- everyone has a breaking point. So where did a medic come into the picture? It turned out Vibrion was a rather elderly human male with Zithrom's syndrome, a kidney problem requiring him to take continuous doses of Clondex in order to stay alive. It was a pretty sure bet the Imps wouldn't be taking tender care of his medical problems. Even worse, before he died he'd go into delirium. And who knew what secrets he'd give away then?

So I reported to the mission briefing with no small amount of apprehension. I hadn't joined the Rebellion for a life of adventure; I'd signed on to save lives. (Skies, that sounds pompous. It's more accurate to say I'd signed on for a steady job doing what I'm good at, for the benefit of the Good Guys.) I felt even more out of place when I met the other team members, commandos all: Melenna, a tiny, cheerful, exquisitely beautiful woman with a cap of loose golden curls and the coldest blue eyes I've ever seen; Gowan, a big dark guy, definitely the strong silent type; Enkhet, a tall, skinny, pale kid whose appearance fairly screamed "slicer;" Liak, a (relatively) small Wookiee with long golden-brown fur and an almost palpable aura of calm about him; and Haslam, regarding us all with his coolly analytical gaze.

"The plan," he said after a long moment, "is to get in, get Vibrion, and get out as quietly as possible. We're not going to take down the Interrogation Center; we're not going to slaughter Imps; we're not out for glory. We're gonna get Vibrion. Period."

His tone of voice was making me uneasy. "Get him in what sense?" I asked.

"In whatever sense we have to," Haslam replied calmly. "If we can evacuate him, fine. If we can't, we can give him a quicker and easier death than the Imps will, and we can keep him from talking. Have you got a problem with that, *Doctor* Leith?" He stressed the title just a little.

Actually, I did. I could see his point: burdened with a nonambulatory rescuee, there was almost no chance the team would make it out intact. On the other hand, I was a doctor, and my job was to do everything I could to save my patient. I kept my mouth shut for the moment, but the twisting sensation in the pit of my stomach was picking up considerably.

"So," he addressed the others. "Basic very-dumb-orphan scoop-and-run -- you've done it a hundred times. We infiltrate the center incognito -- Melenna, Liak, you're the prisoners; standard smugglers-suspected-of-Rebel-sympathies scenario. Gowan and Enkhet are stormtrooper guards, I'm the officer in charge. Aurin--" he turned to me, "you'll have to be another prisoner. You're taking passage with Melenna and Liak to



Sestooine, you've been picked up by mistake, and you don't know anything about anything. Just keep your mouth shut and you'll do fine. How much equipment will you need to bring?"

Luckily I'd had the foresight to think this out ahead of time. "I can manage with one medpac," I replied a little shortly. "I'll need to pack it with extra Clondex and some special equipment."

"Good. We'll get to the prison sector, find out where he is, then get rid of the guards and break into his cell. Once we get in, your job is to get him alert and moving quickly if at all possible. If you can't, we'll have to ... break out without him." The others nodded casually; I had the feeling his hesitation was entirely for my benefit. "Once he's up, we get back to the shuttle. For this part, we'll take the repair access tunnels." He touched a button on the tabletop console, and a holographic schematic of an Imperial-style installation leaped out of the center of the table; another adjustment, and a series of passages were outlined in red. The route from the prison cells to the docking bays was long, tortuous, and confusing.

Melenna chuckled. "This is where Liak comes in. His people are tree-dwellers; he can find his way through any strange maze of branches with never a wrong turn. For some reason it works on space stations as well. We don't understand it, but we don't argue with it."

"The tractor beam's just a single," Haslam continued. "Weak design -- says they don't think anyone can escape. Gowan, you'll break into the main computer and disengage it while our medic here is fixing Vibrion. At full power and with some of Enkhet's fancy shiphandling, we should be able to break free long enough to make the jump to hyperspace. Questions?"

If anyone else had any, they weren't admitting it; the only response was a series of crisp nods from the other team members. I had one, and it was bothering me enough that I didn't even react to the interesting fact that Gowan and not Enkhet was the computer jock. Haslam looked at me sharply, but only said, "Okay, dismissed. We'll meet outside the shuttle at 0600 tomorrow, bay 36. Get some sleep, everyone. Aurin, stay a moment, please."

Once we were alone, I said, "You left something out of the briefing. What if I can't get him moving? I don't think you mean for us to just go off and leave him alive. Who gets to do the dirty deed?"

"Frankly, I'd rather have a medical droid along," Haslam said coolly. "Put a glitch in its programming, and it does exactly what the mission calls for and it doesn't develop any moral scruples at the last minute. Unfortunately, Emdees are expensive. Human medics are a lot cheaper and easier to replace."

"Nice to know I'm expendable," I murmured under my breath. Haslam ignored the comment, but after a moment some of the coldness faded from his face, leaving a look of -- almost -- helplessness.

"Aurin, I don't get any thrill out of killing. I've got a job to do here, just like you. The fact is, we can't leave him to die at the hands of the Imperials, or of his disease. And it's not just because of the information he'll spill. Interrogation is ... well, not a pleasant way to die. I want to get him out as much as you do, but it may not be possible. The question is, if it comes to that -- can you give him something to make it quick and easy for him?"

"You're asking me to kill him. I can't do that." If I was sure of nothing else in this confusion, I was sure of that much. Apart from any other considerations, I'd sworn an oath before they let me out of the Byblos Academy of Medicine: boiled down, it consisted of '*First, do no harm.*'"

Haslam wasn't surprised. "Okay," he sighed, "it's my responsibility. I'll take care of it." Then, in a whisper, "Blast it, I wish they wouldn't do this to me."

I hesitated. I didn't like the train of thought developing in my mind: *Look, if the guy's gonna die anyway, isn't it your job as a physician to make sure it's as easy as possible? If we can't get him out, Haslam is gonna shoot him. If you can't square your conscience enough to overdose him with potassium and make it fast and painless, can you at least sedate him enough so he sleeps through it?*

But that means I'm helping Haslam kill him. I'm being dragged along on this mission to save his life if it's at all possible, not to help end it. You're on this mission to serve your patient as best you can, whether it means saving his life or helping him die as easily as possible.

Skies, I hate this!

"I can give him some conergin," I heard myself saying abruptly. I was dimly surprised to hear that my voice was flat, steady; my insides certainly weren't. "It won't kill him, but it'll put him down deep enough to let you do what you have to."

Haslam looked up sharply. "You'll help me?"

"I'll help you. But only after I've tried everything I can to get him moving and out of there. And this is a medical problem, not a military one. It has to be my decision. Not yours." I held his eyes with my own, feeling sick. "If that's not acceptable, you and the Rebellion can find yourselves another medic. Or a droid."

"Done," Haslam replied, grasping my wrist as if closing a business deal. Which, of course, we were.

* * *

The flight to Selnesh was relatively short, only four days in hyperspace. Of course, four days with the dilemma I had hanging over my head is an eternity and then some. I spent them packing and repacking my medpac for greatest efficiency, mentally reviewing the resuscitation plan, and getting used to the weight of the hold-out blaster up my left sleeve. Melenna had handed it to me just after boarding as a matter of course.

"Wait!" I'd blurted. "I don't want this. I don't even know how to use it."

"Real simple." Melenna shrugged. "Point and shoot."

"But I don't want it! I'm a doctor! I don't shoot people!"

"This go-around, you may have to." Disgustingly, Melenna pushed up my tunic sleeve, fastened the little holster around my forearm, and snapped it down with a final-sounding click. "If you can't, don't. Just try not to shoot any of us, okay?"

We popped back into normal space over Selnesh about the midafternoon of the fourth day. If I'd set out to build a prison planet from the core outward, this would have been it: a gray rocky ball in the middle of nowhere, its sun no more than a bright bluish star. "Bleak" did not even begin to describe it. The surface was totally bare of color or vegetation. The sterile white plasteel dome of the prison sat like a fungus directly below us as we descended. There was literally nowhere else to go on this world that would support life for more than a few hours. I could see why nobody escaped from here.



While Enkhet, already in his stormtrooper armor, exchanged code strings and pleasantries with the docking bay, the rest of us lined up in preparation for deception. Melenna wore free-trader's gear, Liak only his fur, and I a plain civilian tunic and trousers; the precious medpac was fastened around my waist under the loose, long tunic. All three of us wore wrist binders. Gowan, also in armor, held a blaster rifle carefully pointed at the floor. Haslam was in a gray officer's uniform and looked, at least to me, thoroughly official and intimidating.

The jar of landing in the bay was slight; evidently Enkhet was as good a pilot as everyone said he was. I clenched my fists tightly, the cut of the binders into my wrists announcing, *I don't like this. I want to go home. Right now. I'm not cut out for a life of adventure.* Somehow sensing my nervousness, Liak turned around and growled something incomprehensible but reassuring-sounding.

"Pretend you're in a holovid," Melenna suggested brightly. "Playing the part of a prisoner. That's what I do. Just don't say anything. Let the Lieutenant do the talking -- it's what he's here for."

"Thanks," I muttered. Nerves always take me in the stomach, and mine was turning somersaults just then. Better the stomach than the hands, anyway - a doctor had better have steady hands, whether she's nervous or not.

Enkhet joined us from the cockpit. "All clear," he announced casually. "No challenge. They sound bored."

"Good enough," observed Haslam. "Let's move out."

* * *

Getting past the docking bay was a lot easier than I'd expected. Haslam, doing a perfect imitation of an Imperial officer -- clipped speech, formal stance and all -- identified himself as one Lieutenant Grallant, operating number 13398247, and us as smugglers and possible Rebel sympathizers. The base commander, who looked as if he'd heard it all one too many times before, waved us tiredly back toward the passage I figured had to lead to the holding area.

We filed down the gray hallway, ending up in a large bay with cell-lined hallways branching off at regular intervals. The central computer bank was inhabited by four stormtroopers holding blaster rifles at least as big as the ones Enkhet and Gowan wielded, and a crisply pressed officer type wearing captain's insignia who looked a whole lot more alert than his commander. The officer glanced up as we came in, and the troopers all shifted slightly to aim their rifles not precisely at us but definitely in our direction. I suddenly found it harder to breathe. Part of my brain was seriously considering saying "Count me out, thanks, I don't want to play anymore," turning around and walking back to the ship. Since this would have ruined Haslam's pretty scenario, and I was too frozen to move anyway, I kept still and silent.

Haslam repeated the name-rank-and-operating number business for the officer, who (thank the skies) didn't seem inclined to be challenging. Instead, he helpfully fired up the computer and assigned the three of us cell numbers. Prisoner processing apparently took place inside the cells, rather than in the open area -- to reduce the incidence of breaks, I guessed. Since a break was precisely what we had planned, I didn't find this information encouraging.

Enkhet pressed the muzzle of his blaster into my back, pushing me forward. Captain Whoever stepped forward to help get us hardened criminals into cells for processing. Haslam stopped him with an upraised hand.

"I'm going to have to ask you and your men to leave for a few minutes."

"What?" the captain asked blankly.

"I need you and your men to leave the area temporarily." Haslam spoke even more quietly, with an air of complicity. "I'm with Intelligence. We suspect these prisoners have had access to top-secret information about the movements of various Rebel cells. It's not that we don't trust a loyal Imperial officer, but the presence of these prisoners here has to be kept absolutely top secret until interrogation is complete. I'm sure you understand."

"Does Commander Caton know about this?"

"No, and it's important to the war effort that no one knows just now. I can't tell you any more. I shouldn't even have said this much. The reason I brought them here is because I know the reputation of this base's officers and men. There's no more secure place in the galaxy."

"I understand," the captain said gravely, and motioned the troopers to follow him out the door. Evidently flattery went a long way.

"I'll also have to disable the security cameras temporarily. Just until they're processed, you understand. No one must know of their presence here."

"Understood." And it was as easy as that. The Imps simply walked out and closed the doors behind them. Gowan, helmet off, was already slicing into the computer; after a moment, the cameras mounted around the ceiling went dark.

Haslam moved lightly around the room checking for I didn't know what, while Enkhet removed our binders. Melenna stretched her arms and hands forward



to remove the stiffness. "You didn't have to tighten them quite so much," she complained mildly. "My hands are asleep."

"You're the one who wanted to be convincing."

Liak growled an admonishment, and the squabble -- probably the latest chapter in an ongoing saga -- ceased. Meanwhile, I was digging into my medpac again, assuring myself one more time that none of the precious equipment or drug vials were damaged. The ticklish clenching of my muscles, the usual prelude to a full-bore resuscitation, was beginning to push through my fear. "Where is he?" I demanded.

"I'm looking," Gowan replied absently, his attention entirely occupied by the flashing images on the screen. "Okay, here it is. Cell 2826."

"Well, come on, let's go!"

"Aurin," Haslam spoke quietly. "I'm in command of this mission. We go when I say."

"Haslam," I said in the same tone, "you got us past the Imps. Now it's a medical mission. That's my department, remember? There's a man dying in one of these cells. I've got work to do. Let me do it." The words "or else" hung in the air. I didn't know quite what "or else" would involve, but Haslam realized I was serious anyway. He half-laughed, half-sighed, and gave the move-out signal.

The cell was at the far end of the center hallway. While Enkhet stood guard near the hall entrance -- Gowan had stayed behind to compute some more -- Haslam entered a complex code into the keypad at the side of the door. It slid open to reveal a thin, gray-haired human male lying on the pallet at the far end of the small room. He rose half up on one elbow, eyes widening at the sight of us. I absorbed details as I moved quickly to his side, unstrapping the medpac from around my waist: he was very pale, his eyes sunken and his lips dry, indicating dehydration, but he was awake, alert and aware. I'd been prepared for a patient at death's door, and was surprised at how relatively good he looked.

"Is this the rescue party?" His voice was soft and hoarse, but held a hint of wry humor.

"That's us." Melenna had followed close behind me, and gave him a dazzling smile I suspected would get any man off a deathbed in short order. She'd probably intended it that way. "Anything to make the mission a success," she'd commented briefly during the ride in. If flirting with the rescuee would help, she'd do it.

"I wasn't ... expecting you." He had to breathe in the middle of the short sentence; yes, he needed some help. During the exchange I had been rapidly unpacking my equipment; now I placed the IAU -- Intravenous Access Unit -- on his upper chest and pressed the activation switch. While the catheter burrowed through his skin in search of the large subclavian vein leading directly to his heart, I opened two ampules of Clondex, one of endogenous steroid, a cordine patch, and a liter of serum-replacement solution, and laid them down ready to hand. Liak crouched beside me, ready to help if needed; Haslam stayed alert at the door.

"Hey," Melenna remarked, "never underestimate the power of a woman."

"You're in better shape than I thought you'd be," I commented as I worked.

"I had three vials of ... Clondex when I got here ... been underdosing myself. I only ... ran out two days ago."

"How'd you get them past the body search?" Melenna demanded.

"Swallowed them." Weak as he was, Vibrion winked at her. Melenna followed this statement to its logical conclusion and grimaced; funny, I wouldn't have thought her the squeamish type. I ran the scanner over his body, noting the small heart -- another sign of dehydration -- and the shrunken kidneys and adrenals, which went along with the Zithrom's. Blood pressure was a little low, heart rate a little fast, but otherwise everything looked pretty normal. I allowed myself a sigh of relief. *This isn't going to be as bad as I thought, thank the skies. And remember, the next time Briessen wants to send you out on one of these things, say no.*

The IAU clicked, and a backflow of darkish venous blood appeared in its access chamber, indicating the catheter was in the vein. I injected the first unit of Clondex and the steroid rapidly, then started feeding in the serum solution as fast as I could. I had to be careful here; giving a large volume of fluid too fast could tip him over the other way into lung and kidney failure.

"How're we doing?" Haslam asked. "We've gotta move out soon."

"I need a few more minutes. Have they caught on to us?"

"No sign yet," he said, "but let's not push our luck. Liak, go open the access tunnel entrance and stand by." Liak lumbered up from my side and out the door, ruffling my hair with his big paw as he passed.

The fluid bag was nearly empty; I squeezed it to get the last few drops into my patient, then disconnected it. Already Vibrion was looking better, his eyes less sunken and color coming back into his face. I gave him the second round of Clondex, then slapped the cordine patch onto his neck. He flushed red, a hand going shakily to his forehead as the stimulant took hold.

"The headache will pass in a minute," I said. "This'll help you keep up. We need to get out of here. Can you sit up?"

Vibrion nodded, wincing as I helped him to a sitting position and rechecked his blood pressure; it was holding steady. So far, so good. "Liak's got the tunnel open," Haslam said, calmly but with a note of underlying urgency in his voice. I hauled Vibrion to a standing position. Melenna stepping in to get a shoulder under his arm for support, and rechecked the scanner's readings; his pulse had gone up 10 beats per minute to compensate for the change in body position, but blood pressure remained stable.

"Okay?" I asked him.

"Okay." He smiled wanly. "Let's go."

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The access tunnel ran parallel along the hallway, a brightly lit, dusty passage just tall enough to stand up in (Liak and Enkhet had to slouch) and just wide enough for one. Melenna, Vibrion and I, linked in the tail position, shuffled sideways. Liak led, followed by Enkhet and Gowan; Haslam was in the middle, where he could monitor everyone at once. It was slow going, with a couple of back-up-and-start-over maneuvers at first. I hadn't the slightest idea where we were going, and wasn't sure if I cared. I'd done what I came to do, and the post-code ebb of unused adrenaline had left me drained, flat, and hungry. Melenna, on the other hand, was looking keyed-up and nervous.

"This is taking too long," she hissed at Haslam, just ahead of her. "How long do you think it'll be before the Imps figure out something's up? They're not all idiots, you know."

"I'm aware of that, Melenna," Haslam said with careful calm. "It's only been 11 minutes. We have time." Eleven minutes? How could it only have been 11 minutes? It felt like hours since I'd walked into that cell.

Liak grunted something from the head of the line, and we kept shuffling along. I glanced repeatedly up at Vibrion, reassessing his condition; after a few minutes he was dripping sweat -- it was hot in the tunnel -- and noticeably paler as the cordine flush wore off, but he gently squeezed my shoulders and kept moving. It occurred to me that fragile as the old man appeared, anyone who -- at his age, and burdened by chronic illness -- could found and run an entire cell of the Rebellion had to be tougher than tempered titanium. He was certainly proving it now.

After a long few minutes more of this business, we all stopped at a signal from Liak: we were nearing the docking bay. The plan was to throw a concussion grenade into the bay while we remained under cover in the tunnel; with the guards incapacitated and the tractor beam hopefully deactivated, we would scurry to our stolen shuttle, take off, and evade pursuit long enough to complete the run-to-jump for hyperspace.

At least, that was the theory.

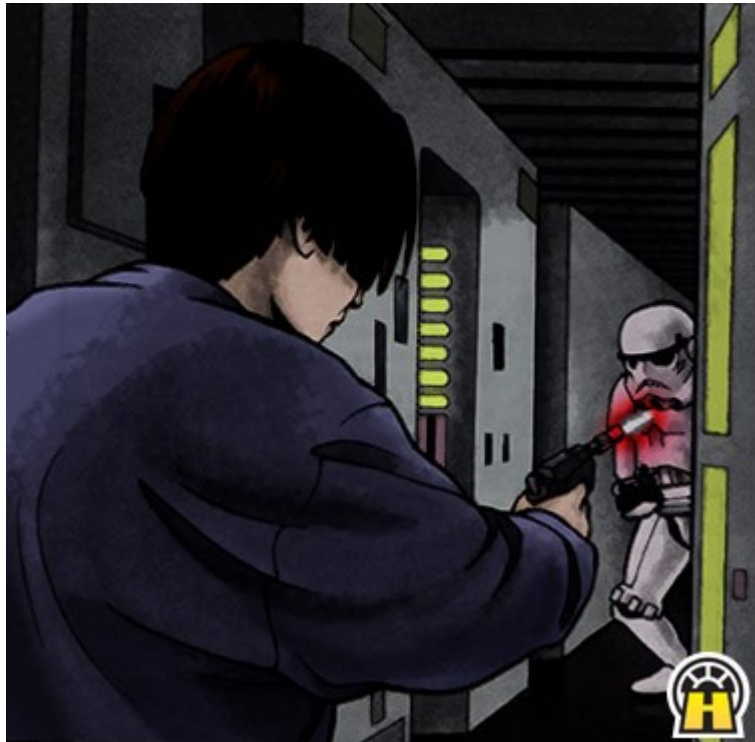
We all crouched down on the dusty floor of the tunnel, except Vibrion, who sat down rather suddenly, as if his legs would no longer hold him. Melenna propped him up against the wall while I scrabbled in the medpac for another cordine patch. I wasn't sure of the wisdom of giving him another round -- it might send him into heart failure -- but I wanted it handy if he did need it. A flash of white caught the corner of my eye at the far curve of corridor, and I glanced up.

A stormtrooper, flattened against the curving wall, was just edging around the corner, blaster up and pointed directly at me.

Ambush, I thought, very coldly and clearly, as time slowed to a halt around me. I couldn't seem to get in a breath -- the nauseated stunned emptiness was almost exactly what I'd felt at age six, after falling off a balcony flat onto my stomach. But my mind, trained to function logically in a crisis, kept clicking right along: *There isn't time to warn Haslam. You're blocking the others -- they can't shoot around you. If you fall, Vibrion is next in line.*

You've got a blaster.

My right hand pulled the little hold-out blaster from its holster under my left sleeve, leveled it at the trooper, and fired. The shot angled upward just enough to pass between the breastplate and the bottom of the helmet; it took him square in the throat, and he let out a choked gurgle and dropped to his knees. His helmet flew off as he went down, allowing me a brief glimpse of a very young man, light brown hair damp with sweat and clinging to his skull, clear gray eyes wide in amazement, before he toppled flat onto his face.



I had just time to be amazed that I'd actually hit him before I was surrounded by blaster shots: Haslam and the others had caught on to the fact that something was going on behind us, and were shooting over my head in a perfectly choreographed blast-and-duck pattern that said they'd been in situations like this before. The rest of the troopers, their cover blown, had moved around the corner into the open and were blasting away at us. I started to turn back, with some confused idea of shielding Vibrion with my body, but Melenna hissed at me, "Stay down!"

Her statement was punctuated by a dull, but extremely loud, explosion from the direction of the docking bay that shook the walls around us. I swallowed to equalize the pressure in my ears and got off a couple of random shots toward the troopers, at the same time groping behind me with my left hand for Vibrion's wrist. His pulse was rapid and slightly irregular, but strong; he squeezed my hand in weak reassurance.

During all this, I'd forgotten to try to breathe again. I gasped, and air rushed into my lungs, making me suddenly dizzy. I dropped my forehead onto my wrist; curled awkwardly in a semi-fetal position on the floor, there wasn't much else I was capable of. I stayed there, clutching Vibrion's hand, until someone sharply wrenched at my shoulder.

"Come on!" a voice shouted roughly. "We're going!"

I looked up to see Gowan bending over me, helmet off and a charred crease of blaster burn slanting across his forehead where a bolt had winged him. He grasped my wrist, hauled me to my feet, and slung me forward toward the docking bay. Behind us lay only a heap of white armor, the gray-eyed boy hidden beneath his comrades. The floor of the bay was similarly littered with the limp bodies of troopers and officers, all knocked unconscious simultaneously by the blast of Liak's concussion grenade. Haslam, at the entrance waiting for us, grabbed my arm and dragged me up the shuttle ramp just behind Melenna and Vibrion; he was leaning heavily on her shoulder, knees buckling and plainly on the verge of collapse. Gowan, following us in, hit the door latch and headed for the cockpit at a dead run; the engines were already roaring in startup sequence. Haslam dumped Vibrion and me onto the passenger seat, rapidly strapped us in, then turned to follow Melenna aft.

"Where are you going?" I gasped.

"To man the guns," he flung back over his shoulder, not missing a step.

"Guns? I thought shuttles didn't have guns!"

No answer but the jolting rise of the craft; then we were flung backwards by the steep drag of acceleration as the shuttle shot forward. The next few minutes were a rough approximation of a whirling repulsorlift ride I'd gone on once during a Coruscant Fete Week: moving straight up, down, sideways, in a corkscrew, and several less-conceivable directions, all at breakneck speed, in pitch darkness (the cabin lights had gone out during the second high-speed maneuver), and this time with the added thrill of people shooting at us. I could dimly hear Haslam and Melenna's casual crosstalk as they shot back; evidently this shuttle did have guns. Vibron was too far away for me to reach, but sat crumpled in his restraints, his eyes sunken again into his head but sparkling. People say emergency medics are excitement junkies, but this was getting ridiculous. Haslam was right about Enkhet's piloting, though; even I could tell he was doing a superb job of keeping us in one piece. Finally the ride turned into a high-gravity Aurin sandwich, pressing the breath out of my lungs as the shuttle made the star-stretching jump to hyperspace.

The next few minutes were a blur, as I got Vibron settled more comfortably and gave him some more fluid and another half-dose of Clondex. Haslam had taken a blaster shot to the left shoulder, which had managed to miss the great vessels and nerve plexus; I cleaned and dressed his and Gowan's wounds. Melenna, who'd been in plain view of the troopers and without armor or any other form of protection, didn't have a scratch on her.

"That's why we keep her around," Enkhet quipped cheerfully, strolling into the common room from the cockpit. "She's our luck." Melenna thumped him lightly on the top of the head with a derisive chuckle, and Enkhet tugged teasingly on a curling golden strand.

I finished Haslam's dressing and was halfway through repacking the medpac, thinking a hot drink sounded like a good idea, when the shakes hit. I always get a little trembly after a code: usually it passes off after a few seconds, but this time it got steadily worse. I knelt on the deckplates in the corner of the common room, face turned to the wall, while the ugly, jeering thoughts crawled around in my brain.

You shot that trooper. You killed him. I thought you were supposed to be a doctor, remember?

I had to! It was him or us.

Yeah, right. All that pious moralizing about your oaths, and do no harm, and the sanctity of sentient life -- and none of it really meant anything, did it?

It wasn't 't just me, not just my own life. I had a patient to protect. I had the whole group to protect.

Oh, come off it! You had to protect them? Who appointed you Hero of the Universe? Face it -- you can mouth off all you want to about morality, but when it comes right down to it, you took a life. You're not a healer, you're a killer.

"Aurin?"

A hand touched my shoulder, and I turned. Gowan knelt next to me, looking tired and battered and absurdly young, open concern in his dark eyes. I just looked at him, unable to get any words around the hessa-ball that had suddenly taken up residence in my throat.

"You know," he said slowly, "you did a good job in there."

"I killed him." A deep breath let me speak, but couldn't keep the tremor out of my voice.

"I know. And I'm sorry you had to ... but I can't say I'm sorry you did." His voice was even, quiet. "Listen to me. Aurin ... this is a war. The point of war is that if you can kill enough of the people on the other side, they'll quit. That's a hard thing to live with. What's even harder is, sometimes people get caught up in the killing who don't really belong there. And I think you're one of those people."

"You can say that again." A shaky half-laugh, half-sob escaped me. "I'm supposed to keep people alive, not ... this."

"Exactly. And that's what makes what you did today so valuable. The Rebellion doesn't have anything like as many troops as the Empire does. If we can't stay alive long enough to win this war, we've thrown our lives away. Look at it this way: you helped keep all of us alive a little longer to fight this thing. And you kept Vibron alive, and that's even more important, just because of who he is. Because he can bring in others who believe what we're doing is right."

I hadn't expected such gentleness, such eloquence out of this dark man who had barely spoken during the entire mission. The hard knot in my throat promptly dissolved into tears. Gowan put an awkward arm around

my shoulders as I cried hot tears of shame, of self-recrimination, of grief, and of sheer reaction to the events of the day.

The tensions and pain gradually drained out of my body along with the tears. After a few minutes I simply stopped crying and slumped exhausted against the wall, dashed my sleeve across my eyes and smiled shakily up at Gowan.

"I'm okay now. Really," I added at his doubtful look. "Sorry I cried all over you. I'd just ... like to be alone for a while."

He nodded and stood up. "Do you want anything? A drink?"

"Not now, thank you."

He nodded and moved forward toward the cockpit. "Gowan?"

He turned.

"Thanks."

He nodded again and walked away. I just sat there for a while, eyes closed, mind drifting. For the most part, I'd done what I came to do. I'd gotten Vibrion out of the prison alive; I'd made it out myself, and so had the rest of the team. And if all that was partly due to my having violated my oath to do no harm ... well, maybe allowances could be made for having done a wrong thing for a right reason. Maybe the pretty rules of medicine don't hold up as well in war. Either way, there was nothing I could do about it now ... except to wish that gray-eyed boy oneness with the Force that binds us all, and to go on with my life and my job as best I could. I sighed, got up -- aching like the aftermath of a stun blast -- and went in search of that hot drink.

They gave me a medal when we got back -- the Field Achievement Award, the one they give all the field operatives who make it back from their first mission. I still have it. I threw it in a drawer and haven't looked at it since. But like a half-healed wound, I always know it's there.